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Big freeze round-up

9 January 2009

Background

The British Isles has experienced almost a fortnight of freezing conditions. Temperatures as low as -9 °C have been fairly common throughout southern areas of the UK, with temperatures struggling to rise above freezing in some places.

The lengthy spell of cold weather has been caused by an area of high pressure which has stayed close to the UK over the past few weeks, bringing cold air across the UK from Europe.

This spell of cold weather is now forecast to end, as milder and more unsettled conditions push across the UK through the weekend, with strong winds in the North.

Impacts

The cold spell caused significant problems in many areas of the country. The Government's bill for Cold Weather Payments is expected to rise to more than £100 million, with Londoners becoming eligible for the payment for the first time since the scheme was introduced a decade ago.

South East Coast Ambulance Service manned its GOLD control for a period, and many A&E departments reported being busier than normal, with cases of flu and broken bones raising admissions.

On the roads, icy conditions led to numerous closures and a significant increase in accidents. Motoring organisations reported a 100% increase in the number of call-outs they received.

The continuous cold conditions caused lakes and rivers to freeze in areas such as the Lake District, Hertfordshire and Essex. Boats were frozen in their moorings on the Monmouthshire and Brecon canal in Pontypool.

The sea froze along a part of the south coast at Poole, and Padstow Harbour was partially frozen. Even the fountain in Trafalgar Square was frozen.

Weather data

Parts of southern England have experienced some of their lowest temperatures since 1991, with south-east and central England recording an average minimum temperature of -8.1 °C and south-west England and South Wales recording an average minimum temperature of -8.0 °C.

Throughout the last fortnight, night-time temperatures have consistently fallen to lows of -8 to -10 °C. The coldest temperature recorded during the period was -12.3 °C during the night of 6-7 January, at Buntingford in Hertfordshire.

How we did

The Met Office correctly forecast the spell of cold weather and kept the public informed via our various forecasts. Our forecasts helped to support vulnerable people across the UK. Support of the Cold Weather Payment scheme, the Cold Weather Alert Service and Healthy Outlook® (our forecasts for COPD sufferers for the Department of Health) all helped to keep the UK healthy throughout the cold spell.